

Berlitz Latin for travellers: a Greek speaker goes to Rome

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Greek speakers living under Roman rule often needed to learn Latin: how did they go about learning it? Using papyri recovered from Roman Egypt, Eleanor Dickey reveals some of the techniques used by these ancient learners and the problems they faced.

English speakers face many difficulties learning Latin: the case system, the genders, all those verb forms, the funny word order, etc. If, while grappling with these issues, they spare a thought for the plight of their counterparts in antiquity – the Greek speakers of the eastern Roman empire who learned Latin in order to communicate with their neighbours and overlords to the west – modern students are unlikely to have much sympathy for those ancient Latin learners. After all, Greek has a case system, and genders, and even more verb forms than Latin does, so the aspects of Latin that are hard for English speakers would not have been nearly so hard for the Greeks.

But there is one respect in which modern Latin students have a far easier time than did those ancient ones: we do not need to learn the Roman alphabet. Of course, we face an alphabet hurdle if we learn Greek, but Latin is written in nice, normal, familiar letters. For a Greek speaker, however, Latin was written in a horribly strange script, one that apparently took considerable effort to learn. We have exercises from Greek-speaking classrooms showing the process of learning the Roman alphabet: copying out letters, getting them wrong, learning their Greek equivalents, getting those wrong, copying out lines of Virgil to use the letters in context and getting those wrong too (sometimes because the teacher had got the model wrong to begin with). In the box below is a (partially reconstructed) Latin learner's alphabet: can you spot the mistakes? (Answers on inside back cover.)

Faced with this unequal struggle to learn the Roman alphabet, many Greeks either gave up or never attempted it in the first place. Greeks did not learn Latin in order to read Latin literature, in which they had no great interest: they learned Latin in order to be able to speak to the soldiers at the local army base or to get around on a trip to the west. So many of them were interested only in being able to speak Latin, not in reading and writing it. As a result, they turned to transliterated phrasebooks that would give them oral proficiency in Latin without learning the alphabet.

Transliterated phrasebooks are of course common today as well. If you are going to Moscow or to Athens you can pick up one that will give you some basic conversational phrases and lists of vocabulary classified according to the various subjects you are likely to need to discuss: airport vocabulary, hotel vocabulary, restaurant vocabulary, etc. The ancient phrasebooks had the same principle but different categories: they contained such things as army vocabulary (as the official language of the Roman army was Latin, communication with the army was a major cause of Latin learning in the east), religious vocabulary (it was important to be able to cope with religious ceremonies abroad, as they were a frequent and often obligatory part of public life in the Roman empire), and vocabulary for buying food at the market.

In the box below are some extracts from these phrasebooks, with the Latin in its original condition (except that, since ancient

handwriting is not always easy to read, I have used a modern font) and the Greek replaced with English. Can you read the Latin? (In these texts the Greek alphabet maps onto the Latin one as follows: $\alpha = a$, $\beta = b$, $\gamma = g$, $\delta = d$, $\epsilon = \text{ě}$, $\eta = \text{ē}$, $\iota = i$, $\kappa = c$ and q , $\lambda = l$, $\mu = m$, $\nu = n$, $\xi = x$, $\omicron = \text{ō}$, $\pi = p$, $\rho = r$, σ and $\varsigma = s$, $\tau = t$, $\phi = f$, $\omega = \text{ō}$, $\upsilon = u$, $\chi\omicron = qu$. Some words are misspelled. Answers are on the inside back cover.)

Vocabulary alone will not get a traveller very far, and the Greeks were well aware of this. In addition to transliterated word lists they had tables with transliterated grammatical paradigms, and transliterated conversational phrases for common situations. Can you read the Latin in these phrases from an ancient phrasebook? (Hint: the author of this Latin did not pronounce the letter h . Also, this text comes from the fifth century A.D., when Greek β was pronounced v as in modern Greek. So Latin v , which in the classical period was pronounced w but by the fifth century A.D. was pronounced v , is transcribed into Greek with β .)

Many of the conversational phrases in ancient phrasebooks are orders clearly intended to be given to slaves: one finds things like 'Wipe off the table!', 'Light the lamps!', 'Give us dessert!', 'Go outside!', 'Call him over here!', and 'Run home!'. And while words for 'please' and 'thank you' do feature in the ancient phrasebooks, they are far less common than in modern ones. This difference reflects a fact of ancient society: a large percentage of the people with whom an ancient traveller interacted were slaves. Wealthy travellers, of course, would bring their own slave or slaves on a journey, for this procedure had great advantages: not only would the travellers be served by familiar, trustworthy people with whom they could communicate in their own language, but the task of speaking Latin with the natives could be left to the servants. It was probably not difficult to purchase Latin-speaking slaves in the Greek east, but even if they did not have such a slave, wealthy travellers could no doubt get their ordinary slaves to learn Latin and do the talking. The phrasebooks we have, therefore, were not written for wealthy travellers. They were written for poorer folk, the ones who could not afford to take their own slaves with them on a journey and who would therefore have to interact with locally hired labour along the way.

An ordinary day required far more interaction in the ancient world than it does today. When we find a hotel room dark, we flip the light switch: the ancient traveller had to get a servant to bring a lamp. When we want to mail a letter home, we stick a stamp on it and drop it in a box: ancient travellers had to find someone travelling to the appropriate area and persuade him to take the letter, or else send a servant specially. When we need to buy food, we can go to a supermarket, put the items we want in a basket, and take them through the checkout without speaking a word: ancient travellers had to go to the market, ask for what they wanted, and bargain for each purchase individually. And if the purchases got too heavy to carry (which, to judge by the

ancient phrasebooks, was frequently the case), ancient travellers had to get a servant to take them home. Modern travellers sometimes get through a trip without making much use of their Berlitz guides; ancient travellers had to do a lot more talking abroad and no doubt made good use of the phrasebooks they carried.

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Σεργμω κωτιδιανους·	Daily conversation:
βενε βενιστις	welcome!
λιβεντερ τη βιδεω	I'm glad to see you
ετ εγω δη, δομινε	and I (am glad to see) you, sir
ετ νως βως	and we (are glad to see) you
νεσκιω κοις οστιουμ πουλσατ	someone's knocking at the door
δισκε κοις εστ	find out who it is
Μαξιμους τη βουλ σαλουταρε	Maximus wants to greet you
ουβι εστ;	where is he?
φορας στατ	he's standing outside
κοιδ εστ, πουερ;	what is it, boy?
ομνια βενε	all is well
αδπωνιτε ιν μενδιουμ κανδελαβρας	put the lamps in the middle
βενε νως ακκιπιστι	you have received us well
ετ ιν οκ γρατιας αβημους	we are grateful for this too

Δεαρουμ νωμινα·	Names of goddesses:	Δη μιλιτιβους·	About soldiers:
Ιουνων	Hera	μιλιτια	warfare
Ιουνων ρηγινα	Queen Hera	καστρα	camp
Διανα	Artemis	φοσσα	ditch
Λατωνα	Leto	δουξ	leader
Ουενους	Aphrodite	ιμπερατωρ	emperor, commander
Κερης	Demeter	τριβουνους μελιτουμ	military tribune
Πρωσερπινα	Persephone	ταβερνακουλα	commander's tent
Ουεστα	Hestia	εξερχικτους	army
Φορτυνα	Tyche	λεγιων	legion
Εισις	Isis	σιγνα	standards
Ματερ μαγνα	Great mother	μιλιτης	soldiers
Τερρα ματερ	Mother earth	πεδεστροης	foot-soldiers
		εκουειτης	cavalrymen, knights